MEMPHIS TRANSIT AUTHORITY EMPLOYEE-1918-1966

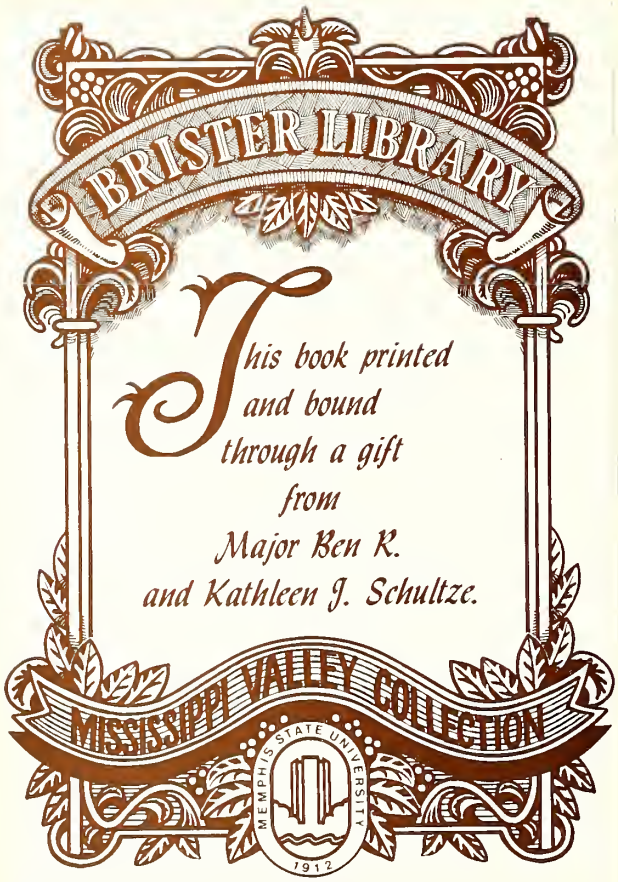
INTERVIEW WITH

JAMES T. DUNCAN, SR.

BY - TERRI J. SMITH

ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH OFFICE

MEMPHIS STATE UNIVERSITY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NOVEMBER 24, 1984

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Sr.

MEMPHIS STATE UNIVERSITY

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PLACE 1113 Rearing Road Memphis, TN

DATE November 24, 1984

James T Duncan Sr

(INTERVIEWEE)

Terri J Smith

(For the Mississippi Valley Archives
of the John Willard Brister Library
of Memphis State University

(OHRO FORM B)

An Oral History Interview with James T. Duncan, Sr.

November 24, 1984

Interviewer; Mr. Duncan, could you tell me something about your background before coming to Memphis?

Mr. Duncan; (I'm) J.T. Duncan, Sr. and I was born over in Arkansas, Mississippi County, January 21st, 1901. I was born on a small farm, my father was a farmer and he cut timber when he couldn't work on the farm. In 1906, he was killed while cutting down a tree. A tree hit him in the head and killed him instantly.

That left my mother a widow with three children. I have two sisters, one older than I and one younger than I. We had a hard time because people on a farm didn't have much to live on. But, we managed and I grew up and I worked at everything I could to make a little extra money for food. In later years, my mother married a railroad man, a section foreman, and he drank pretty heavy and lost every job he ever had (to) drinking.

So, he got another job down here at the Non Canna (a division of the Illinois Central Railroad) in 1918 in a switch yard for IC railroad company. And I worked on a railroad track under my stepfather. So, later on my stepfather started to drinking and they carried him up and locked him up, (they were) afraid he'd get killed by those hump-engines down there making up those trains.

So I got a job over at (the) Memphis Street Railway Company in 1918 during the war(WWI) when they couldn't get no men

and I was too young for a motorman, so they made a conductor out of me. I worked for the company steady and long hours. I was at the company for a couple of years and I started going with a young lady who happened to be the man that instructed me to be a conductor on the streetcar's (daughter). I went with her a whole year and we were married.

I have five children; four sons and one daughter. Three of the sons are doctors, they specialize in general surgery. I have a son (who works) with Delta Airlines. He was a mechanic foreman, now he schedules the planes to be worked on. He works for Delta and lives in Atlanta, Georgia.

I; When you came to Memphis, you said it was during WWI. Was there a shortage of men and is that why you got the job?

JD; Yes, that's the reason I got the job. It was during WWI and they couldn't get nobody to work on the streetcars. They offered the college boys a job, or anyone who could work awhile, morning or afternoon. So,I worked long hours. I worked what they called a regular run. I'd run a regular run, then run an extra or work on a trailer, pull trailers. They had the streetcars run the crosstown run from Poplar Street to Agnes Place, that was four blocks south of Lamar. It was a little ole short line, but it served the Poplar Line, the Madison Line, the Peabody Line, and the Lamar Line. They (the passengers) wouldn't have to go to town if they wanted to transfer back out on these other lines. That's the reason they called it the crosstown line. And then they had one line that went all the way out to Raleigh Springs.

It pulled a trailer in the morning and one in the afternoon. It also pulled trailers on the Fairground Line. It was a heavy line. They had one line that went down to Lakeview, Mississippi. It was out of state into another state. I never did ride that line, there was only cars. But I did see them many a times.

So, after I was with the streetcar company a couple of years, I started going with the man's daughter that instructed me to be a conductor. We went together a year, then we got married.

I; How old was your wife when you started dating her?

JD; Well my wife, when I was dating her, told me that she was older than she was, and her birthday was different. I bought her some fine Christmas presents, and just before we had been going together a year, why we (got) engaged to get married. We were going to slip off and be married, but the fellow I rented the apartment from told my boss and he called me in the office and told me not to steal that girl,to go and ask for her. So I promised my senior boss that I would ask for her. So I went back to my would-be father-in-laws' house and I sat in the swing with him. We talked a pretty good while and I finally asked him. And I said, " Mr. Baker, your daughter and I had the intention of getting married today, if you don't have any objections." Well he gave me a little lecture and said she's mighty young.

I; And she was fourteen at the time?

JD; Well, she was 13½ when I started going with her. I went with her a whole year and she was 14½ when we got married. And I

was just a little bit over twenty years old. So we lived a happy life and raised these five children with the help of my wife, who I lost eight years ago, in 1976.

I; Can you tell me a little bit about what Memphis was like when you first came here? Where was the downtown, what were the stores like?

JD; Well, alot of people used to come over here, ride the train over here. That was about the only way they had to get to Memphis, because there weren't too many automobiles in that day and time. They didn't have trucks for freight, they depended on railroad trains and alot of people would ride trains. And those Jewish fellows, that had stores near Grand Central Station, would get out on the street and try to pull country folk in and try to sell them their material, what they specialized in. And the city was no farther than Parkway, all the way around Parkway. And I watched it grow from Parkway on up. I have been living here in Memphis for over 65½ years and I've seen it grow quite a bit. They only had one skyscraper and that was down on Madison and 2nd. They have built other buildings since then, it (Memphis) has been growing and expanding all this number of years.

I; What did you do for entertainment in Memphis then?

JD; Well, entertainment, we used to go to movie theaters all the time. We never did go to the Opera, just movie shows. We were there when they opened up the Low State Theater, down on South Main Street. We were there for the opening day of that, my wife and I.

It (Memphis) was a river town. They used to ship alot of cotton by steamboat at that time too.

I; There was a big cotton industry at this time?

JD; Yes, that's right, a distribution center. Memphis was and is still today for alot of things.

I; Yes.

JD; Alot of cotton was here, kind of a distribution center here for that. They (Memphis) have good schools. Good colleges and good medical colleges.

I; Would you say the river port, in the 1920's, brought alot of people into Memphis? Were there alot of barges or steamboats, or what?

JD; Yes, they used to have steamboats come in there and load that cotton on those boats and haul it. Well, it's the trains. That's the only way (they can transport things). They had two depots down there, Union Station and Grand Central Station. Grand Central Station was on Main Street and Union Station was on Calhoun near 3rd. For different railroads operated out of here.

I; Were there any outstanding leaders or politicians that you can remember at this time?

JD; Yes, Ed Crump was the largest leader for a number of years here. Everybody knew Ed Crump, and when election time came you would hear from him. He would do everything he could to get his party elected, and did. So we had a good politician and leader. He led the city in the right direction.

I; Well, what can you tell me about the Flu epidemic?

JD; Well in 1918, when I first started (working on the) streetcar here, I'd run that crosstown line that went right by Central High School, and they made a hospital out of that. And they'd carry those people who were real sick in one day, and the next day they'd carry them out as a corpse. Quite a few of them. Cause it was pretty contagious. And in the back of the streetcar, they made them put disinfectant or something in the cars on the seat there. And also you had to keep the little ole back window down in the streetcar. And that was 1917, and 1918 was a real bad winter, it was really cold.

I; Were there any other places, other than Central, that they converted into emergency hospitals?

JD; I don't remember that, all I remember,(is Central) they must have but I just don't remember.

I; Can we get back to your job at Memphis Transit for a minute. How much were you paid at Memphis Transit when you started out?

JD; I started out at, I believe it was, 16¢ an hour, very small. And then during the war, the War Labor Board gave us a raise and I think we went up to 21¢ an hour. And we worked that for a pretty good while.

I remember when I lived over in Arkansas and I was carrying papers. I carried the Press-Scimitar, no the News Scimitar in the afternoon and the Commercial Appeal in the mornings. I could read about the strike they had over here when they were forming the Union. There was one or two killed during that strike, but finally the Union won out. And after I broke in and was instructed to be a conductor, I joined the Union.

They still have a Union today with Memphis Transit Company.

I; How many employees were there at this time, at Memphis Transit Company? Could you give me an approximate number.

JD; I don't know, I don't know exactly how many we had. But I know we had over 700 at the time, that were in the Union. Which some of them worked in the shop and maintained the equipment. They did all their own rebuilding, the motors and everything was electric, you see. Those cars and pull-trailers had four powerful motors on it. And I was conductor til they started the one-man streetcar. Then I was instructed, and I was much older, that was a number of years later and I learned how to drive a streetcar and operate a one-man streetcar. In later years, then they had trackless trolleys, two trolleys, and ran them a long time.

And later years, why they transferred to them big diesel busses, what they have today. And I ran them at the time I retired, in January, 1966. I worked for the Memphis Transit Company for 47½ years. And I enjoyed it, made an honest living.

I; Do you remember the stock market crash? Was there much affect on Memphis at the time? The depression?

JD; It didn't affect me any, but it affected alot of them. I remember a little bit about it, but I wasn't involved in any way because I was a poor man myself.

I; You didn't have any stock.

JD; No, I didn't have any stock and no money. I signed up down here at the bank to have a checking account down there. Why I told them, " I'm doing the opposite now, I used to borrow

money from the Union Planters uptown at Main and Adams.

I; Well, what about the depression? Was there much effect on Memphis?

JD; Oh yes there was quite a bit. They used to have soup kitchens and soup lines, and they tried to help the people out. Like what they're doing today in some places, you know, give them a place to stay.

I; During WWII, there were some new things that sprung up in Memphis, like the Kennedy Hospital and the Defense Depot.

JD; Yes ma'am, that's right. Well the old Kennedy Hospital is out here on Getwell, that's why we have a street named that. And now then they built one up (in the) downtown area, near the main part of town on Poplar, called the Veteran's Hospital.

I; So Memphis was a pretty important town during the war, would you say?

JD; Yes, I'd say it was very important. It's the hub center of the South. Alot of transportation and everything, you see. They can move it quickly in each direction. I think it's (Memphis) fared well.

I; You used ration stamps after the war, I assume?

JD; How's that?

I; Ration Stamps.

JD; Ration Stamps...

I; For food, gas...

JD; Yes, I knew they had them, but we was fortunate enough. Me with my job, why I was able to stay alive and keep my family

alive. But there was quite a few people that didn't though. Alot of them lost their jobs, some got despondent, like they're doing nowadays.

JD; Mr. Duncan, Thank you very much for your time to do this interview. I've enjoyed it very much.

TRANSIT FIRM DRIVERS WILL RECEIVE AWARDS

138 To Be Honored For Safe Operating

DINNER WILL BE TONIGHT

The Memphis Street Railway Co. will honor 138 of its operators for safe driving for a year or more at a dinner tonight at 8 at the Gayoso.

Each operator will receive a National Safety Council safe driving award. Those honored have driven more than 26,000 miles each without a preventable accident.

Part Of Incentive Plan

Eight of the operators have driven buses and coaches a grand total of 1,696,566 miles without a preventable accident. They are Joseph A. Smith of 945 East Trigg for driving 240,720 miles in nine years; John F. Stewart, Route 1, 237,680 miles in eight years; Thomas L. Messer of 2746 Dunn, 212,160 miles in eight years; Hugh A. Howell, 238,170 miles in eight years; James T. Duncan of 869 Inez, 212,670 miles in eight years; John M. McMullen of 207 Cossitt Place, 211,630 miles in seven years; J. W. V. Harrimon of 2374 Spottswood, 187,170 miles in seven years, and John M. Gathings of 2056 Nelson, 426,280 miles in 11 years.

The dinner and the issuing of National Safety Awards are part of the transit firm's safety incentive plan for encouraging safe operation and prevention of accidents, Col. Roane Waring, company president, said.

"Safety has always been one of the prime considerations of this company throughout the 52 years it has served the public," said Colonel Waring.

Wives Will Attend

"Our safety program is carefully built on these cardinal principles: thorough training, close supervision and recognition of meritorious service through safety incentive bonuses and awards.

"We feel much has been accomplished. We will continue to exert every effort possible to eliminate all preventable accidents of the future. We are proud of these operators; they are assets to the company and to the City of Memphis."

Safety awards issued by the National Safety Council to professional drivers require each recipient to operate his car, truck or bus for 12 consecutive months or more without a preventable accident.

Wives of the safety winners will attend tonight's banquet.

SAFE DRIVERS — Eight Memphis Street Railway operators have driven a grand total of 1,696,566 miles without a preventable accident. They are Joseph A. Smith (1), John F. Stewart (2), Thomas L. Messer (3), Hugh A. Howell (4), James T. Duncan (5), John M. McMullen (6), W. V. Harrimon (7) and John M. [illegible]

ill health, shot himself, at Concord, N. H., on Nov. 4.

The brief, simple service stirred deep memories of the years when Britain was under almost con[illegible] bombing and Winant was virtually part of the British Government. [illegible] services were Winston Eden and other [illegible] ernment with worked cl[illegible] est [illegible]

Today's Bus Riders Far Cry From Old

MTA's Oldest Driver Recalls Days When Families Rode for Pleasure

By TOM BARBER, *Press-Scimitar Staff Writer*

James T. Duncan, Memphis Transit Authority's oldest driver in point of service, has noticed a change in bus riding habits during the 45 years he's been behind the wheel.

"In the old days, folks would ride the streetcars just for the ride," he says. "Whole families would get on and ride the loop. Now about the only ones that ride for pleasure are strangers who want to sightsee."

Duncan was a boy of 17 when he left Frenchmans Bayou, Ark., and came to Memphis because he heard there was a shortage of drivers at Memphis Street Railway Co. He started working June 5, 1918, and has driven 1,350,000 miles since then.

Duncan, 62, started with the Memphis Street Railway as a conductor on the old Crosstown "Dinky" which operated between Poplar and Agnes. During the flu epidemic of 1919 he worked both a day and night shift because there was such a shortage of manpower.

"The old dinkys used to seat about 30 people but we would pack them in the aisles and carry close to 60," he recalls.

Duncan, who has been driving a No. 9 Normal bus for the last 15 years, married the daughter of the man who taught him to be a conductor. He and Mrs. Duncan, 816 Inez, have five children, four sons and a daughter. Three of the sons are doctors and one is maintenance inspector at Delta Airlines. They also have eight grandchildren.

MODERN BUSES are a far cry from the streetcars which James T. Duncan operated when he first started out 45 years ago.

He figures he has hauled about 4 million customers—including three who held him up and took his money at gunpoint.

The Hestory of My Life ab
I J.T. Duncan Sen was born in Miss County Ark
on 21 Jan 1901 - My mother was a Jennie McBride and
Married to Jim Duncan who moved the river from
Ryerburg Tenn They settled on a small farm on
7. Bayou ark I had one Sister 2 yrs older than I and
1 Sister 2 yrs younger than I my father farmed & Cut
Timber when he couldent work on farm in the year of 1906
in Jan he cutting down a tree his partner hollered for
him to Run that the tree was going to kick back one of the
Tree limbs hit on the tree and hit my father on the
Head that killed him instantly my father was getting
in Shape to farm he had 2 Mules 1 Fine hand
and just a new Wagon my Mother was left with two 3
Children We Stayed on farm till we Lost Every thing
after about 3 yrs This man A.L. Young came to this town
7. O. ark - to B. R Road Section foreman he was a Batchelor
and Mr Mayes in town Just Boarding at our Home
He lived across the R.R. Track from our home after
a couple years My mother Mr Young were Married
Some time later he was fired from his job
so we Moved Jarell ark in about 2 years
I lost My mother at the age 17. our home was
Broken up My young Sister went to live with the
older Sister Ouvent Wilson ark - to stay with
one of my X Friend and Family
I got job in Box Factory in Wilson ark

P-(2) witness W.A. Caraway
to Marige Marie Clark

That was in 1918 During First world War
Men Labor was Scarce my Step Father came back Burnell ark
and brought to Memphis Step Father Kod got them
another job with S.C. R.R. Road in Bunch yard
& worked on Railroad Track till got the yet
with Mem street Railway in may 1918. I was 17 yrs old
Ihe Conn shirt of men Then hired me to B.C. Conductor
I was with street car co - 2 yrs & meet a young Little Girl Chene
Father 2 yrs. ago Construction to B.C. Conductor
His Name was Baker Mr Baker Had 2 Girls + 2 Boys
I met his eldest Daughter Chene Quent with her
1 year then We were married - Friday May - 13 - 1921
Mr Baker was in Bad health he had a Nervous break down
They were in Bad Circumstances Chene - 14½ yrs old
I was a little over 20 yrs

Chene Born Jan 12 - 1907 - Deceased Oct - 8 - 1976
Chene gave Birth to a Big Baby Boy & T 12 yr Aug - 26 - [redacted] 1923
Howard Eugene Born Nov 19 - 1925
Mary Jo " Dec - 28 - 1929
Lloyd " Dec - 28 - 1931
Donald " Oct 15 1935
J.T. yr. Gen Surgeon
Eugene Delta Air Mat Wep
Mary Jo High Power Dept Manager + Saleswo
Lloyd Gen Surgeon
Donald " Surgeon

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